

# CULTURE PROFILE: MESKHETIAN TURKS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Meskhetian Turks were deported en masse in 1944 during Stalin's regime from Meskheta, now a region in the Republic of Georgia, to Soviet Central Asia because Stalin feared their disloyalty in a conflict with Turkey. In the late 1980s, when ethnic tension erupted in Uzbekistan and resulted in the 1989 pogrom, they were forced to flee Central Asia and were treated as illegal migrants in Krasnodar, Russia, where they have been living. Without any hope to live a normal life in Russia or to return to their homeland,

15, 000 Mesketian Turks have been accepted for resettlement by the US State Department.

## I. HISTORY

The homeland of the Meskhetian Turk, known as Meskheta, lies along the borders of Georgia and Turkey. During the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922), Turkish settlers moved into Meskheta as part of Turkey's expansion. The resulting mix of Turkish and Meskheta populations became known as the Meskhetian Turk. The Russians call them the Meskhetian Turki, or "Turks from Turkey," rather than using the more generic term for *Turk*.

Prior to the 1944 deportation, the Meskhetian Turks lived in rural agrarian societies. They were skilled farmers who developed sophisticated agricultural techniques, including the use of wood and ceramic conduits for crop irrigation. They raised cattle and crops, and then sold their fruits, vegetables, wool, meat, and dairy products at the local Georgian markets. Due to the Diaspora many of these traditions have been lost or are incompatible with urbanization.

Source: [http://www.ksafe.com/profiles/p\\_code3/160.html](http://www.ksafe.com/profiles/p_code3/160.html) June 7, 2005

## III. GEOGRAPHY

Dispersed in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan (where most have re-located), the Meskhetian Turks aspire to return to their ancestral homeland in Georgia. Only a relative handful have been permitted to return, and many live in difficult circumstances in places such as the Krasnodar region of Russia, where they are often subject to discriminatory and abusive treatment by local authorities, such as in the granting or withholding of residency permits. The refugees coming to Wisconsin are from the Krasnodar region.

Krasnodar Region of Russia



BY NUMBERS: The Diaspora

Country	Approximate Population
Russia (Krasnodar)	17,000
Ukraine	9,000
Azerbaijan	100,000
Uzbekistan	40,000

## IV. BELIEFS

Most Meskhetian Turks practice a liberal form of Islam known as the *Hanafi rite*. This sect of Islam places importance on the holy writings of the Prophet Mohammed above oral traditions as the basis for Islamic living and laws. This is a widely practiced rite throughout the former Ottoman Empire. They have also retained much of their pre-Islam belief system, which focus on magic and sorcery. The practice of inducing rain by magic is common, along with healing by the use of "moon water," or water that has set overnight under a clear sky.

Meskhetian Turks also celebrate rituals and festivals connected with agriculture. For example, farmers may break eggs over the heads of their oxen before beginning the season's plowing. Spring weeding is followed by a folk festival with dancing, games, fortune telling, and pantomimes.

### *What's in a name?*

The construction of the term "Meskhetian Turk" is steeped in ethno-political issues. Most Meskhetian Turks continue to insist that they are Turks, not ethnic Georgians. They are, therefore, referred to sometimes as Turks of Meskhetia rather than Meskhetian Turks because Meskhetian implies ethnic Georgian to most Georgians. Some scholars prefer an even more precise phrasing: "deported Meskhetians of Turkish orientation (although some are not, in fact, of Turkish origin). Still others distinguish between two groups of deported people—Turks and Georgians.

Finally, the Meskhetian Turks themselves distinguish between a pro-Turkish part of the population, which is represented by the movement 'Vatan', and a pro-Georgian part, which is represented by the movement of 'Khsna'. Members of the latter typically consider themselves Georgians. They are critical of Vatan for being insufficiently aware of the complex ethno-political situation in the region, as well as for what they consider an unrealistic political agenda of Meskhetian Turkish nationalism. As one Khsna activist explained, what is most important is to return to the homeland of their ancestors, not national orientation. These divisions have posed an extra challenge to the permanent resettlement of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia.

Source: [http://st-socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/publications/2004\\_04-sani.pdf](http://st-socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/publications/2004_04-sani.pdf)

### *The Asadov Family*



Photo Essay of Meskhetian Turk Refugees being resettled in Pennsylvania by French photographer Christophe Calais:

[http://www.invisu.fr/showFeatures.php?nrep\\_id=135](http://www.invisu.fr/showFeatures.php?nrep_id=135)

## V. CULTURE

The diet of the Meskhetian Turks consists of heavy bread, olives, cheese from sheep or buffalo milk, onions, molasses from grapes, fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Meats such as fish, wild game, poultry or especially lamb are commonly consumed. Islam prohibits them from eating pork and shellfish.

Village social life includes picnics, barbecues, and betting on horse races. Soccer is Central Asia's most popular sport and children enjoy games such as hide-and-seek, follow-the-leader and story telling.

Meskhetian Turks have a rather patriarchal social structure with women typically maintaining the household, raising children and entertaining female relatives and neighbors. Men meet at coffee houses to visit and talk politics or business.

## VI. HEALTH

*The Meskhetian Turks have largely lived on the periphery within the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union. While their access to Soviet health services has been limited it is important to consider the Soviet health paradigm as their frame of reference for formalized health care.*

The Soviet free health care system differs greatly from the American model. There are no family doctors or primary health care providers and patients do not choose their own doctors. There are district clinics, hospitals and doctors specifically for children and adults in a central area.

Dissatisfaction with the district doctor or clinic is commonplace. Reasons for dissatisfaction include: the low level of the district doctor's professional skills; the absence of modern equipment or medicines in the district clinic/hospital; the patient needed serious treatment or surgery; the patient needed special consultation.

Concepts of healing are also quite different. Good doctors in the former Soviet Union treat diseases by trying to reveal the possible causes and focusing treatment there. Hospitals often have long waiting lists if an illness is not an emergency. The average stay for hospital in-patients is three weeks.

Patients are given "sick lists" stating their disease and the number of days to stay at home or in the hospital. Only the district doctor has authority to write out such lists for adults and children. This makes patients dependent on the district doctor's good attitude. Often a good relationship with the doctor is established by means of bribes.

Source: [www.ethnomed.com](http://www.ethnomed.com)

## VII. CHALLENGES SPECIFIC TO RUSSIA

### A. POLITICS

Meskhetian Turks in southeastern Russia are denied all civil, political and social rights. They have no influence at local, provincial, regional or national levels – as evidenced by the failure of their appeals to these officials. Local government officials, acting in direct violation of Russian federal law, have not been investigated or removed by Moscow.

### B. CITIZENSHIP

Local officials do not recognize marriages of Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai, Russia. Women and children cannot take their husbands surname, since the union is unrecognized, threatening their ability to claim their husband's (or father's) property in the event of his death. Children are born stateless, denied Russian citizenship, since local authorities falsely argue that Meskhetian Turk children automatically have Uzbek citizenship. Some children have been denied entrance to local kindergartens, and none are eligible to attend Russian Universities.

### C. SAFETY

Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar face arbitrary beatings and arrests from local paramilitary groups. Poverty can also lead to "scapegoating" and the denial of citizenship rights. Historian Geoffrey Jukes notes, "The effects of prolonged impoverishment on inter-ethnic relations in such heterogeneous societies as those of Central Asia are likely to be unfavorable, because poverty is seldom evenly spread between ethnicities and minorities are often made scapegoats for it." Such may have been the case of the Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan prior to the pogroms of 1989 and 1990. Meskhetian Turks were falsely perceived as economically well off and were described as wearing "expensive clothes, gold watches" and driving nice cars. The resulting tensions, in areas that are the poorest of Central Asia, found their outlet in violence.

### D. ECONOMIC

Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai, Russia are prohibited from employment, receiving their pensions, and owning property. They had survived by informally leasing land for agriculture, but the district authorities forced local landowners to cancel these lease. Meskhetian Turks are routinely fined for "illegal trade" since they can not provide paperwork.

Wisconsin will begin resettling Meskhetian Turks in the summer of 2005, following the successful resettlement of families in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Scranton, Pennsylvania. Approximately 15,000 Meskhetian Turk refugees from the Krasnodar region of Russia will be resettled in the United States within the next five years.